

Male Bonding and Shame Culture: Hitler's Soldiers and the Moral Basis of Genocidal Warfare

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Early in October 1941 Captain Friedrich Nöll was given an assignment which caused him grave disquiet. His battalion commander, Major Kommichau, ordered him to shoot the entire Jewish population of the village of Krutscha in Russia – men, women and children. In this village to the west of Smolensk, to the rear of the German army, Nöll was in command of the 3rd company of the 1st battalion of the 691st infantry regiment. All three companies of the battalion received similar killing orders. But their leaders reacted in different ways. Lieutenant Kuhls, a member of the Nazi Party and the SS, carried out the order with his company without hesitation. The opposite reaction came from Lieutenant Sibille, a teacher aged 47. Alluding to the systematic killing campaigns of the Einsatzgruppen, he told his superior officer that he 'could not expect decent German soldiers to soil their hands with such things'. He said that his company would only shoot Jews if they were partisans. He had, however, been unable to establish any connection between the Jews and the partisans. The old men, women and children amongst the Jews were, he maintained, no danger to his men, so that there was no military necessity for such a measure. Asked by his superior, when would he finally get tough, he answered: in such cases, never.¹

After initial evasiveness Nöll in the end reacted as ordered after all. He too was in no doubt that carrying out such shootings was no part of the duties of the Wehrmacht, and that according to paragraph 47 of the military penal code he could and should reject an order which he recognised to be criminal.² But Nöll did not refuse to carry out the order. He was afraid of making himself unpopular with the battalion commander and of

¹ According to statements made by Sibille and other witnesses interrogated at the beginning of the 1950s. See letter Sibille, 2.2.1953, Hauptstaatsarchiv Darmstadt, H 13 Darmstadt, 979, Ks 2/54 ./ Nöll, Zimmer u. Magel, pp. 207-210, and verdict from 10.3.1956, here 756f.

² Erich Schwinge, *Militärstrafgesetzbuch nebst Kriegssonderstrafrechtsverordnung* (2nd ed., Berlin, 1944), 100-109.

being considered soft. All the same, he did not wish to burden his own conscience with the deed. He gave the task of carrying out the executions to his company sergeant-major. The sergeant-major was outraged that he had been landed with it, or so he said to comrades and subordinates, but he defused the indignation articulated amongst the soldiers by remarking that ‘orders is orders’ and organised the shooting of between one and two hundred Jews before the evening.³

Doubtless most of the soldiers only obeyed the order with reluctance. Many of them declined to pursue escaping Jews and grumbled later about the ‘dirty business’ demanded of them, especially since ‘pregnant women’ had been amongst the victims.⁴ Some of the soldiers were ‘totally shocked and close to nervous breakdown’.⁵ After the executions a theology student gave vent in conversation with a comrade to his ‘spiritual distress’ over ‘being compelled as a theologian to have to take part in such terrible measures’.⁶ Another soldier asked on the way to the place of execution to be relieved of this duty. The request was granted, but only after the executions had begun and after he himself had started shooting, albeit deliberately missing, as he stated later. On the other hand there were also soldiers who regarded the matter as necessary in view of the danger from partisans.⁷ Some even showed ‘enthusiasm for the executions’.⁸ But they represented a minority – just like the objectors.

The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust

This story throws a glaring light on the participation of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust, but also on the soldiers’ freedom of action (thus resembling the story told by Christopher Browning about Reserve Police Battalion 101), and it raises the question: why? Why did soldiers murder defenceless civilians instead of doing what soldiers everywhere have always done and still do, namely fight armed adversaries?

³ The verdict of the appeal court assumed a minimum number of 15 men and women. See footnote 1, verdict from 10.3.1956, here p. 756. Numbers of between 50 and 250 victims were given in witness statements.

⁴ Statement Adolf Z. 24.09.1953, *ibid.*, 360; similar Karl B. 5.12.1953, here 379.

⁵ Statement Hans W. 28.8.1953, here 337.

⁶ Statement Hans W. 28.8.1953, here 336.

⁷ Statement Hans W. 28.8.1953, here 337.

⁸ Wilhelm W., 11.12.1953, here 386.

That the Wehrmacht played a crucial role in the murder of the European Jews and not only supported the genocidal prosecution of the war between 1939 and 1945, but also initiated it, has become amply clear since the end of the 1970s through historical research and then since 1995 thanks to the exhibition *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* mounted by the Institute for Social Research in Hamburg. Leaders of the Wehrmacht were decisively involved from 1941 in the planning of the war of annihilation against ‘Bolshevism and Jewry’, and with the so-called ‘criminal orders’ they laid the basis for unpunished attacks on civilians, especially Jews and Communists. They allowed more than half of their 5.7 million Soviet prisoners of war to be shot, to die of starvation or be condemned to forced labour and its fatal consequences. The great majority of soldiers in the Wehrmacht, of whatever rank, paid homage (like the rest of the Germans) to an anti-Semitic ideology. In many occupied areas such as Serbia the Wehrmacht organised the Holocaust largely independently of the Waffen-SS. Individual Wehrmacht units and soldiers participated voluntarily in the mass shootings of Jews in the East. Countless units gave the Einsatzgruppen logistical support by tracking down the local Jewish population, rounding it up, cordoning off places of execution and instigating deportations. In the context of the escalating partisan war in the Soviet Union, but also in other theatres of war after 1942 the Wehrmacht was responsible, as well as the Waffen-SS but by no means any less than them, for innumerable massacres amongst Jews and other sections of the population.⁹

Surveying the research over the last thirty years, two tendencies are notable. First, the independent genocidal conduct of ever larger sections and in particular of lower ranks of the Wehrmacht has come under scrutiny. In other words, soldiers in the Wehrmacht were not simply victims of hierarchies of command and of indoctrination but were independently operating perpetrators.¹⁰ Secondly, it has been established that the war of annihilation did not begin in 1941 but instead went back to the invasion of Poland in 1939 and of France in 1940.¹¹

⁹ On the state of research see most recently Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter, Ulrike Jureit (eds.), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* (Munich, 2005).

¹⁰ Thomas Kühne, ‘Die Viktimisierungsfälle’, in Michael Th. Greven and Oliver von Wrochem (eds.), *Der Krieg in der Nachkriegszeit* (Opladen, 2000), 183-196.

¹¹ Jochen Böhlér, *Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg. Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939* (Frankfurt, 2006); Raffael Scheck, *Hitler’s African Victims* (Cambridge, 2006).

At the same time, however, there is no doubt that the Wehrmacht, unlike the SS, was not only ideologically heterogeneous, but also manifested different patterns of behaviour in carrying out the Holocaust and in terrorising the subjugated civilian population.

Why did so many join in? What was it that made ‘ordinary men’ into mass murderers? And why did so many look on and thus condone the genocide? In answering these questions research on the perpetrators of the Holocaust has so far concentrated on the mass shootings in the East and therefore on the Einsatzgruppen and associated units, for example the police troops. Two competing models of explanation have become popular. Based on the Milgram experiment, Christopher Browning argues from the perspective of social psychology and stresses the group conformity and the authority structures operating in small face-to-face groups. Daniel Goldhagen, on the other hand, has laid emphasis pointedly on what is in his view a specifically German and historically particular disposition, ‘eliminator anti-Semitism’, i.e. on the role of ideology.¹²

The dualism of the two approaches, which has not really been overcome in research since the middle of the 1990s, has a long tradition reaching back to the Second World War, as allied opponents of Germany tried to understand why the Germans were fighting so doggedly when their defeat was long since predictable. Whilst the American public presumed that the Germans were suffering from a mass psychosis rooted in racism, a group of American military sociologists interrogated German prisoners of war and demonstrated that it was not hatred of the Jews which led German soldiers to fight on, but group sociology: primary group ties, strong personal bonds, familial in character and based on trust, in the smaller military units. Such compulsive ties, reinforced by the paternalistic authority of NCOs and subaltern officers, represented the putty which held the Wehrmacht together, according to Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz.¹³ This recourse to the supposedly timeless soldierly virtue of comradeship was then challenged around 1990 in an influential study by Omer Bartov; in his assessment the anti-Semitism of the soldiers combined with the draconian military discipline to which they were

¹² Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men* (New York, 1992); Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (New York, 1997).

¹³ Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, ‘Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II’, *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 12 (1948), 280-315.

subject and with the catastrophic living conditions on the Eastern Front to produce legalised brutalisation and ‘barbarisation’.¹⁴ The most recent research into partisan warfare involving the Wehrmacht also employs categories such as brutalisation.¹⁵

The present essay suggests an integrating answer to these problems, and does so in two respects. On the one hand it combines the two practical questions about the ‘joining in’ of the soldiers during genocidal violence and their capacity for endurance in the face of defeat. On the other, it relates cultural and ideological factors to elements of social psychology and anthropology. To put it another way: it is not comradeship (sociology) or anti-Semitism (ideology) which explain the genocidal violence and the combat stamina of the soldiers, but the two together. More accurately, a specific and historically localised symbolic order, combining stereotypes of the enemy with the experience of community, formed the basis of the mass involvement in the Holocaust and total war. My thesis is: after the First World War the ethical code revolving around individual responsibility, which is characteristic of modern western societies, was displaced by a moral system in which the only thing counting as ‘good’ is that which appears good for one’s own community, whilst everything figures as ‘bad’ which is detrimental to it. This group morality was inculcated in the Nazi state in camps for youth, for training and for the military. In the war after 1939 it operated as the motor for involvement of the soldiers, by instigating and sanctioning group pressure, group life and group honour.¹⁶

The Comradeship Myth

At the end of August 1925 some 5000 World War veterans and 6000 further visitors assembled on one day in Constance for a veterans’ meeting of the Baden infantry regiment ‘Kaiser Friedrich III’ No.114. The ‘day of the 114th’ was intended to indicate to ‘the whole fatherland’ the path out of the ‘unspeakable hardship’ into which it had descended as a result of the recent war. The old soldiers seemed destined to show the way. The typical soldier had been, as the town’s Protestant vicar put it, ‘sneered at by the

¹⁴ Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army, Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York, 1992).

¹⁵ Benjamin Shepherd, ‘War in the Wild East. The German Army and Soviet Partisans’, MA, Cambridge, 2004.

¹⁶ For more details see Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft. Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2006).

horror of all the mass deaths, despised, degraded’. But he had been pulled from this hell by ‘the supporting, compensating, alleviating counterweight of his comrades’. ‘It was they who had loyally shared with him all the suffering and the meagre joys as well. [...] That was comradeship – that is comradeship’. The ‘secret of comradeship’, so the Catholic vicar added, lay in the ‘enduring awareness of what is human’. Returning from the firing line, ‘soldiers were able in the company of dear comrades properly to recover their sense of what it means to be a human being’.¹⁷

It was thought necessary to revive this comradeship if the hardship of the present was to be overcome. ‘We need’, demanded Schaack, the Catholic vicar, ‘to steep and cleanse our whole public life in the spirit of comradeship’, so that the Germans could again attain national greatness. At the same time the new nation, unlike German society in the war and afterwards, should be united, free from class and other internal splits. The ‘day of the 114th’ represented precisely this ideal. It was a comradely ‘people’s community in miniature’. Even the deepest political gulf dividing Germany – that between supporters and opponents of the Weimar Republic as a democratic state – seemed to be bridged. Other public gatherings often saw disputes over which flag to hoist – the black, red and gold of the Republic, or the black, white and red of the former Empire. But on ‘the day of the 114th’ both flags were flying ‘peacefully together’.¹⁸

However, this picture of peaceful togetherness was deceptive. The people’s community in miniature, which ‘the day of the 114th’ boasted to be, did not fully reflect the nation. The two Christian denominations were represented on the regimental day along with all the non-socialist parties - the conservatives, the Catholic Centre Party, the Liberals and the nationalist veterans’ associations - but not the Social Democrat workers’ movement and their veterans’ association, the Black, Red and Gold Reichsbanner, nor the Jews. The festival committee had denied the Jews’ former field rabbi the honour of giving an address to the fallen.¹⁹ The Social Democrats took a dim view of the whole event anyway. As they saw it, the ‘fine title of “comrade”’ was only employed by the ‘so-called comrades’ who as officers had found ways of tormenting their subordinates

¹⁷ Special page of the *Konstanzer Zeitung* marking the 1925 regimental day, and *Deutsche Bodensee-Zeitung*, celebratory supplement on ‘the day of the 114th’. Both 31.8.1925.

¹⁸ *Konstanzer Zeitung*, 31.8.1925.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.8.25.

and treating them like ‘pigs’ on the parade ground, and often ‘financially exploiting’ them too.²⁰

The events in Constance were not peculiar to this locality, they followed a pattern of public remembrance of the First World War prevalent everywhere in Germany. In the war the German nation had been more split than ever before. In the end the revolution on the Left had installed the republic and swept away the monarchy and with it the rule of the Right. Whilst the Left celebrated this outcome of the war and condemned the monarchy and the military as the instigators of vast mountains of corpses and of economic disasters, the Right used the stab in the back legend to castigate the Left for its alleged responsibility for the military defeat, for the political chaos and the economic misery.

The categories Right and Left are not entirely adequate to describe the political and social fragmentation of Germany. But the dispute over the collective remembrance of the ‘Great War’ did have the character of a dichotomy. Around 1920 the pacifist ‘No more war’ movement was confronted by the ‘everlasting’ soldiers in the Freikorps groups. Around 1930 the conflict was revived in the mass media and in parliament when Erich Maria Remarque’s anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* gained the hearts and minds of young people and the nationalist camp anathematised the pacifist ‘infestation’ of the younger generation.

The crux of this dispute was, however, that beneath the surface a consensus was developing. Militarists and pacifists were working on a myth of comradeship which, whilst not glorifying war, at least made it bearable. Those on the Left were not satisfied merely with repudiating the comradeship myth of the Right. They were constructing a counter-myth. Of course you had to keep alive, as the Reichsbanner saw it, the memory of the ‘breach of comradeship’ by the officers, who did not keep to ‘the unwritten laws of comradeship’, but filled their bellies at the expense of their ‘hungry comrades’. But that ‘type of person’ did not deserve ‘to be called comrade’. By contrast there were the ‘real comrades’ and real comradeship.²¹ The comradeship of those below was directed against military authority. Comradeship thus denoted standing shoulder to shoulder against your

²⁰ *Konstanzer Volksblatt*, 12.5.1921.

²¹ *Das Reichsbanner*, 26.9.1931, 310.

superiors. The ‘four infantrymen’ in Ernst Johannsen’s novel of the same name about life at the front take revenge on a sergeant who ‘threatened to shoot a man who didn’t want to go over the top’ by shooting at him from behind. This deed had been carried out by a new member of the group, who precisely because of this subversive act ‘was found to be worthy of their comradeship’.²²

But in this as in other anti-war novels comradeship on the battlefield had the effect which the officers wanted. In all such cases comradeship operates as the motor of military violence, by carrying the individual soldier along and thus relieving him of personal responsibility. Nobody mutinies, nobody deserts. And after 1918 comradeship was invoked as the essence of humanity, altruism and solicitude. Even immediately after the end of the war the National Association of Disabled Soldiers, Veterans, and War Dependants (Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegsteilnehmer und Kriegshinterbliebenen), a Social Democrat organisation, had tightened the ‘old bonds of comradeship’ and exhorted every disabled veteran to remember the comrade ‘who had once borne him out of the fire, when he himself was lying there helpless and with broken limbs’.²³ Those who had proved themselves as comrades in the war could not be inhuman.

Killing was presented, in both revanchist and pacifist remembrance of the war, as a collective act determined by fate. Comradeship produced, in the accounts of veterans on both Right and Left, a pull from which the individual could not escape.²⁴ Remarque’s anti-heroes act outside of individual responsibility. ‘Beside me a lance-corporal has his head torn off. [...] If we were not automata at that moment we would continue lying there, exhausted, and without will. But we are swept forward again, powerless, madly savage and raging; we will kill, for they are still our mortal enemies ... and if we don’t destroy them, they will destroy us.’²⁵

The myth of comradeship transformed individual dismay into group conformity in warfare. The myth of comradeship thus responded to an onus placed on the Germans, namely the moral burden engendered by the piles of corpses the First World War had left

²² Ernst Johannsen, *Vier von der Infanterie* (Hamburg-Bergedorf, 1929), 11, 13f., 48f.

²³ *Mitteilungen des Reichsbundes der Kriegsoffer und Kriegsbeschädigten*, 6.12.1918, 5.

²⁴ See e.g. Joseph M. Wehner, *Sieben vor Verdun* (Munich, 1935), 40f.

²⁵ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (New York, 1982), 115.

behind. That burden had been intensified by the guilty verdict implied in the Versailles Treaty. After 1918, the experience of the horror of an industrialized war and your own participation in the immense violence of the war could no longer be ‘categorized’ as individual guilt and responsibility. The collective memory of these orgies of destruction concealed the ‘I’ in the ‘we’. Individual responsibility was dissolved in that ‘we’. Communities of comrades, resigned to their fate, neutralized their aggression toward those outside of the community through altruism and harmony within it.

What happened around 1930 in Germany might best be understood as a change of ethics. Ethics are the framework for ideas about our ways of living. We are accustomed to timeless definitions of moral behaviour. Historians, however, know that morals are a social construct. They depend on time, culture and society. For longer than historians, cultural anthropologists have been examining different moral settings. In a broad range of research they have dealt with the opposites of shame culture and guilt culture.²⁶ Guilt culture is seen as the moral paradigm of Western modernity. A society shaped by guilt culture trains its citizens to be responsible for their own actions. The question of morals is here a case for introspection. Guilt is experienced individually. It is dealt with in dialogue with God or with the superego. In shame culture, on the other hand, the controlling gaze of the community sets itself up as the highest moral authority. Shame is grounded in the fear of exclusion, exposure and disgrace, which the community allots to the individual who does not submit to its rules. Shame culture trains one to be inconspicuous, to conform, to participate – and to be happy through doing so, through being in good hands with the group, through enjoying security and relief within the community. Both moral paradigms arise, in variable proportions, in every society. The point is: in what ratio do they do so? In the military, shame culture is always more important than in the civilian areas of modern societies. That distinction evaporated in Germany after 1918 and even more during the Nazi era. At that time shame culture attained broad societal significance, which is otherwise most unusual in industrial societies.

Cultivating Shame Culture

²⁶ Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston, 1946). On Benedict’s shortcomings see M. R. Creighton, ‘Revisiting Shame and Guilt Cultures’, in *Ethos*, 18 (1990), 279-307.

By 1930 at the latest the conformist set of values had ceased to be the prerogative of the nationalists and militarists. It had become part of the common culture of the Germans. The youth movement had also prepared the ground for it. Arising out of disaffection with the rigid world of their elders of the Wilhelmine generation, this movement initially wallowed in the pathos of individualism. Friendship, not comradeship, was the idea which guided it in the period of the leagues of youth.²⁷ But the youth movement did not work on an individualistic counter-model to comradeship, it sought instead to merge it with friendship. This semantic syncretism reflects the indecision of a movement which tried to combine individualistic development of personality with the security of the community. Franz Matzke wrote in his widely read *Jugend bekennt* (Confessions of Youth) in 1930 that young people obeyed ‘even when we know better and feel otherwise. But it is an obedience in the outer regions of the soul, not in its nucleus, which is always individual and foreign to the community, albeit longing for community’.²⁸ This ‘Confession’ is another indicator that the shift from guilt culture to shame culture was by no means total. But Matzke summed up what occurred: the morality and way of life revolving around the ‘ego’ became more shut away than ever. It was not allowed to break out into the external world. It could not be exhibited. It became less and less possible to speak about it. Beside the many egos united around the campfire a collective we held sway in the ‘hordes’ and leagues of youth. You could expect suspicious looks if during a meal you withdrew from ‘brotherly sharing’ or if you gave in to an inclination to ‘go your own way’.²⁹ The community, this was the threat implied in the youth movement or in the military, ‘spots the outsider and knows how to defend itself’.³⁰ For ‘the comrades themselves are the most vigilant when it comes to shirkers’.³¹

Before 1933 nobody was forced to participate in this community life. But young people from all political and social backgrounds wanted to be ‘pressed into’ a comradeship which compels a ‘mother’s boy’ to ‘curtail his private demands’.³² It was left to the Nazi state to fulfil the longing for community and to place obstacles in the way of almost every

²⁷ Matthias von Hellfeld, *Bündische Jugend und Hitlerjugend* (Cologne, 1987), 33f.

²⁸ Frank Matzke, *Jugend bekennt* (Leipzig, 1930), 57.

²⁹ *Das junge Deutschland* (1930), 599.

³⁰ *Das Reichsbanner*, 17.10.1931, 336f.

³¹ *Das junge Deutschland* (1931), 303.

³² *Arbeiterjugend* (1926), 108.

alternative. The agencies engineering this were the Hitler Youth, the National Labour Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst), and the military service and various other paramilitary or military camps. It was there that young and older Germans alike learned how to give up a value system revolving around an individual perspective on life and on personal responsibility. Sebastian Haffner found himself confronted with this in 1933 in a camp he had to attend for candidates for the German civil service. 'If someone committed a sin against comradeship, or "acted superior" or "showed off" and exhibited more individuality than was permissible, a nighttime court would judge and condemn him to corporal punishment. Being dragged under the water pump was the punishment for minor misdemeanors. However, when one of us was proved to have favored himself in distributing butter rations—which were still quite adequate at that time—he suffered a terrible fate. [...] Before much could be said the unfortunate man had been dragged from his bed and spread-eagled on a table.' As Haffner saw it, comradeship 'actively decomposed' both 'individuality and civilization. One of the highlights of such decomposition was the 'boyish' custom 'of attacking a neighboring dormitory at night with "water bombs", drinking mugs filled with water to be poured over the beds of the defenders A battle would ensue, with merry ho's and ha's and screaming and cheering. You were a bad comrade if you did not take part. [...] It was taken for granted that comradeship prevented those who had been attacked from telling tales.'³³

There could be no community without the others, the 'egoists' and outsiders. Military service was the drilling square for shame culture. There were many possible ways in which comrades educated deviants into comradeship and assimilated themselves into the community. A tank gunner received a symbolic burial for his failures in formal drill. On the command of a sergeant he was made to lie in a hole and pull his steel helmet over his face. His comrades covered him over with a sheet of corrugated iron, and the sergeant shot three blank cartridges over the 'grave'. When he made mistakes in shooting, he had to stand with a cigarette which the sergeant pretended to shoot out of his hand. Only later did the unfortunate gunner find out that blanks had been loaded. Once he fell in on parade with a dirty neck and his superior told him to wash, which his comrades took as an encouragement to drag the bawling young man into the washroom and 'scrub him

³³ Sebastian Haffner, *Defying Hitler* (New York, 2002), 288-291.

down'. Some time later, with the sergeant to the fore, they poured two buckets of water into his bed in the night. A legal prosecution of the harsh but popular sergeant was stopped. In their evidence his comrades showed little sympathy for the 'sniveller', who at the slightest reprimand started 'trembling and howling' and 'wouldn't join in any more'. And the military judges took the view that such 'rough practical jokes' were entirely appropriate for the 'uncompromising demands of modern warfare' which were made on 'useful soldier material'.³⁴

Anybody could find himself back in the outsider role who failed to adapt to the mood of his group and resisted demands to sacrifice his self on the altar of the we. In the military your superior was at hand not only as the teacher of this virtue but also as its catalyst, in torturing the recruits with mud baths, locker room and dormitory roll calls, masquerades and confinement to barracks. For hatred for the tormentors had a conciliatory note. It ensured a certain harmony within the group. Thus in 1942 a Wehrmacht recruit wrote to his friend in the Hitler Youth that 'we' had 'imperceptibly grown together into firm comradeship' through the harassment suffered in the first three weeks of serving together – following the slogan 'nobody can get to us' and the motto 'and should our arses turn to leather, never mind, we'll stick together'.³⁵

Military comradeship developed amongst recruits through defending themselves against the terrors inflicted on them by their superiors. Defensive comradeship provided power, security and a safe haven during the impotence, insecurity and loneliness of soldiers trapped in the workings of the military obedience and subjugation machine. It often issued in little 'conspiracies'. Dieter Wellershoff's comrade Edi had 'gone to the equipment vehicle in accordance with regulations and with official permission in order to have his boots soled, but had not come back, although it was only some four kilometers away. [...] That was an unauthorized absence from the unit'. Wellershoff and his comrades knew that they were liable to punishment if they did not report Edi. But they did not see him as a traitor and 'believed in Edi's nonchalance and his fantasies', which did not really endanger his ties to his comrades. 'And a secret solidarity with this crazy guy

³⁴ Strafsache gegen Feldwebel Wilhelm J., 18.5.1944 u.a., Bundesarchiv-Zentralnachweisstelle Aachen-Kornelimünster, W 11/M 59.

³⁵ Hermann Melcher, *Die Gefolgschaft* (Berg a.S., 1990), 112f.

prevented us from reporting the incident'. Instead they hushed up Edi's absence for a day and even during the night, when there was trench digging to be done. Edi did indeed return after a day and turned out to be a 'good comrade', who had gone AWOL, not for himself, but for the sake of the group, to 'purloin things'. As 'booty' he brought a side of bacon which 'he shared out amongst us'.³⁶

A comrade was someone with whom 'you could get up to something now and then'. So Lieutenant Gerhard Modersen put it in his diary in 1943.³⁷ For countless soldiers getting up to something together meant one thing above all: adventures with women. Modersen was married. But it was precisely adultery, which along with his comrades he constantly practised, which for him represented the attraction of life as a soldier. It was *not only* a matter of sexual needs. At least as important was the ability to boast of sexual adventures to your circle of comrades. Showing off about sex was as much a part of assimilation into a community of male buddies as affectionate homo-eroticism. Both demonstrated the social sovereignty of the leagues of males, their independence from real women, their superiority over the family and home – over civilian society and civilian morality. The moral grammar of comradeship always obeyed the same rule: anything was allowed which the group liked, i.e. anything which enriched and intensified its social life.

Assimilation into the Community through Crime

Comradeship lived off collective breaches of the norm. All absorption into a community is based on demarcations and the construction of opposites. The radical form of these processes is the suspension of generally valid norms by sub-cultural groups, in other words entering a community by means of the illicit and the criminal. This acculturation via the illicit meant different things to men and to women. For men it was a privilege and a must. In order to be acknowledged as a man 'amongst men', they had to be prepared to do the illicit or at least the disreputable, and to do so in the company of other men and under their scrutiny. The comradely league of men was constituted by the infringement, the transgression or suspension of the norm. What norm it was, was not without a certain arbitrariness. The crucial thing was to breach the norm, which gave the league of men the

³⁶ Dieter Wellershoff, *Der Ernstfall* (Cologne, 1995), 188.

³⁷ Gerhard Modersen (Pseudonym), Diary 1935-49, copy owned by the author of this article.

illusion of being above morality and thus above the cultural foundations of society, in fact of being able to determine these foundations itself.

Leagues of men forming themselves into communities through the illicit and the criminal were not peculiar to the military or to Germany in the Nazi period. As shown by many historians, sociologists and cultural anthropologists in studies of male initiation rites, of criminal fraternities and street gangs, not least of other military organizations and other wars, such mechanisms seem to have almost universal importance. So what was specifically German or Nazi about it? What connection exists between the exceptional genocide orchestrated by the Nazi state and carried out in Europe by the Germans and the breach of norms in small, usually face to face relationships by restricted groups of males?

In Nazi Germany assimilation into the community via criminality was arranged by the state. Hitler himself was well aware of the sociology of crime and presented it as a political prescription. In 1923 he declared that there were ‘two things which can unite human beings; shared ideals and shared roguery’.³⁸ This maxim was put into practice before 1933 as well as afterwards. An early high point in its state application was the brutal elimination of internal party opponents and other adversaries in the course of the so-called Röhm putsch in the summer of 1934. As is well known, the murders were carried out jointly by members of the SS and the Reichswehr. The two pillars of the Nazi state, the new and the old, thus combined in such a way as to leave no ‘way back’.

Of fundamental significance in the present context, looking at the mass of soldiers in the Nazi war, are the criminal orders which were issued under the seal of secrecy during the preparations for the attack on the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941, but which could not remain secret and were not intended to do so. According to these orders, what were called ‘political commissars’ of the Red Army, although they were not more closely defined, were not to be treated as prisoners of war according to international law, but were to be ‘seen to’ either at once or after further ‘checking over’. The war jurisdiction decree suspended ‘obligatory prosecution’ for offences against members of the subjugated civilian population by Wehrmacht personnel, even if it was a case of ‘military crime’. *De*

³⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Reden* (Munich, 1925), 89.

facto, the two commands together declared open season on both prisoners of war and the civilian population of the occupied areas.³⁹

These orders, crassly contrary to international law as they were, were not carried out in all Wehrmacht units with equal consistency. They did however provide the basis on which the Wehrmacht was drawn into the Holocaust and thus into a social and cultural process which can best be understood as a comprehensive absorption into a community by means of criminality. That is not to say that all soldiers became criminals to the same extent. Some refused to take part or stood aside. But the wholly diverse attitudes and variations in conduct in themselves oiled the machinery of genocidal warfare. The functioning of this social mechanism has been well described by Primo Levi, with reference to concentration camp society and to the role of uncertain individuals and collaborators who wavered between refusal and participation. The collaborators ‘betrayed once and they can betray again. It is not enough to relegate them to marginal tasks; the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they can no longer turn back. This way of proceeding has been well known to criminal associations of all times and places. The Mafia has always practised it.’⁴⁰ It was precisely this Mafia principle which operated in the German Wehrmacht too.

Lieutenant Fritz Farnbacher, a Protestant, although he took part in the Russian campaign from day one and served at the front, was probably never involved personally in the murder of Jews or other defenceless persons,. He instead tried to keep his distance. But three days after the attack on the Soviet Union the fact that the troops were feeding ‘off the land’ was already giving him a headache, for ‘all manner of things are being “pinched”’.⁴¹ In the middle of July 1941 his unit picked up a string of deserters – not partisans or such like – amongst whom there was a Jew ‘who is supposed to be suspicious, a commissar or some such [...] And now it is decided that the Jew shall be shot. According to higher orders, commissars are to be shot. That is extended to Jews’,

³⁹ *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944. Ausstellungskatalog* (Hamburg, 2002), 43ff.

⁴⁰ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1988), 43. Compare Letizia Paoli, *Mafia Brotherhoods. Organized Crime, Italian Style* (New York, 2003).

⁴¹ Fritz Farnbacher, Diary, 1941-48, typescript in the possession of the author of the present article, 23.6.1941.

he notes in his diary. First, though, the suspect is interrogated under the guidance of a ‘very dashing’ major who by means of his ‘Jew comforter’, a sturdy stick, tries to beat the whereabouts of other commissars out of him. Farnbacher finds it ‘terribly spine-chilling’. After innumerable kinds of mistreatment the Jew is ‘bumped off’.⁴² So it goes on. Deserters are shoved into prison camps with catastrophic conditions – ‘these people will maybe feel cheated’.⁴³ The villages and houses of civilians are set alight, their tearful inhabitants may well arouse pity, but nothing can be done, Farnbacher records. And again and again commissars turn up who have to be ‘shot on the spot’; but ‘nobody wants to do it’, not Farnbacher either. ‘People shrink from the responsibility’.⁴⁴ They were well aware of international law. Those who didn’t want to infringe it, chose like Farnbacher to keep silent.

There was silence at the beginning. But in the threatening scenarios of the partisan war, dramatized by rumours and propaganda, the scruples about criminal warfare gradually dissolve. Farnbacher had heard ‘in what bestial ways the Russians have handled our men, smashing their skulls and using bayonets on them’, and so he was fully in agreement that ‘no more prisoners should be taken’ and that ‘no more false moderation’ should prevail.⁴⁵ Such rumours and experiences confirmed Nazi propaganda and the ‘criminal orders’ which insinuated that ‘the political commissars’ are guilty of ‘hateful, cruel and inhuman treatment of our prisoners’.

What Farnbacher heard and saw was nevertheless not entirely based on imagination and insinuation. He experienced ‘dirty tricks’ perpetrated on his own troops by hostile ‘civilians’ and began by overcoming his inhibitions in ‘requisitioning’ food for his men. A gunner trying to requisition a pig drove his vehicle over a mine: ‘three dead, one severely wounded, one lightly wounded. I’d sooner deprive these people here of their last cow!’⁴⁶ Soon afterwards his scruples about the ‘bumped off’ civilians begin to evaporate. ‘What we’ve come to!’, he remarked at the end of 1941 on hearing that some 30 Russian prisoners had been simply ‘bumped off’ because it was so far to the assembly point: ‘Five months ago we wouldn’t have even said that, let alone dared do it! And

⁴² Ibid., 20.7.1941.

⁴³ Ibid., 21.7.1941.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3.8.1941.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 2.7.1941.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 27.10.1941.

today it's a matter of course, of which every one of us approves on reflection. No mercy for these predators and beasts!'⁴⁷

That the prisoners who were not shot at once starved to death, that one comrade set up a 'game hunt', in other words he decided to 'bump off' the next Russian (amongst the prisoners) wearing the kind of boots he wanted for himself, all of this soon merited only a mention in passing.⁴⁸ At the same time enthusiasm grew for shared experiences and adventures which reminded the troops of trips with boys' leagues and which occurred during the requisitioning forays and campaigns against partisans in the locality in spring 1942. You didn't run into partisans, but the booty in a village was all the more sumptuous: potatoes, greens, 50 chickens, grain, three sucking pigs, 'and above all a cow', were loaded on to 30 sledges. 'Then I put myself at the head of my forces, once I have assured myself again that they're all present [...] and march off homewards. The evening is as beautiful as the morning before it. The wind is at our backs and we race along'. The mood is one of elation, not least due to the ordinary soldiers' sense of humour: 'On our expedition, when I asked whether the cow had been paid for, they just said "Yessir!". To my question, how had they paid, came the answer 'With cigarette cards!'.⁴⁹

Another Wehrmacht lieutenant, Werner Groß, drove 'around the area' in a cart and horses with his men in the spring of 1943. They had, he proudly wrote: 'searched villages, combed woods and cleared the area of gangs [...] We lived like gypsies and tramps'.⁵⁰ The magic potion which enlivened these cleansing campaigns and plundering trips came from the awareness of being above civilian society. Soldiers like Farnbacher or Groß may not have entirely abandoned this morality. The regular troops of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS did not murder defenceless opponents. That reflected the traditional understanding which the military had of themselves. In practice things looked different. The 'gangs' which Gross fought were a synonym for partisans, and Nazi propaganda equated partisans with Jews. 'Where there are partisans, there are Jews, and where there are Jews, there are partisans'. This was the succinct conclusion of a course which had been given in Mogilew at the end of September 1941 on the initiative of the commander of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 30.12.1941.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 05.1.1942.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 27.3.1942.

⁵⁰ Werner Gross (Pseudonym), Letters to his parents from his time in school, in the Hitler youth, and in the war, 1930-45. Landeshauptarchiv Koblenz, Best. 700,153, Nr. 286-291, 4.4.1943.

the forces at the rear of the middle sector on the front, General Max von Schenckendorff. The course was conducted by the head of Einsatzgruppe B, SS Brigade Commander Arthur Nebe, and the Senior Commander of the SS and Police in Russia Central, SS Gruppenführer Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. At the end of the course the participants observed an action against partisans carried out especially for their benefit. 32 Jews of both sexes were murdered. Infantry Regiment 691 was represented on this course by the head of the 2nd company of the 1st battalion, Lieutenant Kuhls, who two weeks later unhesitatingly carried out the order mentioned at the start of this essay. Major Kommichau and Captain Nöll as well as Lieutenant Sibille were notified in a report of the result of the course.⁵¹

In the East they were not faced by normal adversaries, this was the message that propaganda and orders again and again sought to implant in the minds of German soldiers, in order to encourage commitment to a kind of warfare which was contrary to international law. This propaganda always followed the same principle. It was insinuated that the enemy was guilty of brutality and criminality, in order to justify brutality and criminality on the German side as merely a reaction to ensure physical survival or the preservation of honour. The former was used as an argument by Hitler in his notorious speech to the top leaders of the Wehrmacht on 30 March 1941, a record of which has been preserved in the form of notes made by Fritz Halder. 'A communist is no comrade, before or after the battle. This is a war of extermination. If we do not grasp this, we shall beat the enemy, but thirty years later we shall have to fight the communist foe [...] The troops must fight back with the methods with which they are attacked. Commissars are criminals and must be dealt with as such. ... In the East, harshness today means lenience in the future. Commanders must make the sacrifice of overcoming their personal scruples'.⁵²

As well as anxiety about the physical security of your own unit and your own people's community, there was also the appeal to collective honour, which was tarnished by alleged earlier atrocities committed by an inhuman and thus inferior adversary. 'Soldiers on the Eastern front are not only fighters according to the rules of war, they are

⁵¹ *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, 462-468, 580-585.

⁵² Charles Burdick and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (eds.), *The Halder War Diary 1939-1942* (Novato, CA, 1988), 346.

also the bearers of an inexorable folk concept and the avengers of all the bestialities inflicted on the German nation and its kindred peoples. So soldiers must show understanding for the necessity of tough but just atonement to be extracted from the sub-human Jewish race', declared Field Marshall von Reichenau on 12 October 1941.⁵³ Honour challenged in this way demanded vengeance, retaliation, atonement and abandonment of the morality of conscience, of sympathy and scruples. Retaliation, like other forms of terror and thus the brutalisation of warfare by the Wehrmacht, was justified by reference to its deterrent purpose, in other words to the future. But retaliation has a genuine moral dimension as well as this psychological one. The honour code of vengeance demanded the visitation of communal force on those who had done wrong to members of your own group, or on their relatives, and it legitimised this force against the background of a collective morality which was not interested in the personal responsibility of the victims or in your personal conscience - shame culture. On both sides there were no individual responsibilities, only collective ones. It was this morality which was appealed to by the atonement commands, a morality which instead of murdering the real instigators of partisan attacks permitted and required the killing of random members of their 'group'. Both sides, the group which was being avenged, and the other which was the target of the vengeance, could be defined arbitrarily, as could the number of victims. In order to combat the 'communist insurgent movement in the occupied areas', 50-100 communists should be killed henceforth as 'atonement for one German soldier's life' and as a deterrent, the Chief of Staff Keitel laid down in a decree dated 16 September 1941.⁵⁴ That the proportions were jacked up from 1:5 or 1:10 to 1:100 was a result of the politics of toughness and deterrence, which regarded lenience as retreat and knew no better than to answer every destructive act suffered with ever greater destruction, in order to demonstrate the strength and the identity of your own group.⁵⁵

From the information we possess about the perpetrators of these massacres it is possible in almost all cases to deduce that by no means all of them behaved

⁵³ *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, 89.

⁵⁴ Facsimile in *ibid.*, 515.

⁵⁵ See esp. Michael Geyer, 'Civitella della Chiana on 29 June 1944: The Reconstruction of German "Measure"', in Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds.), *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II* (New York, 2000), 175-216.

unscrupulously. As much as mythical remembrance of the First World War and the secondary socialisation in the youth camps and in the Wehrmacht had prepared the ground for internalisation of shame culture, the scruples of many soldiers seem to confirm Theodor W. Adorno's hope that human beings are 'always better than their culture'.⁵⁶ Culture nevertheless was stronger than individual motives. The same is true of the 1st battalion of the 691st infantry regiment as of the police battalion 101 investigated by Browning. Many members of these units were afraid of being shown up in front of comrades, of being considered cowardly, feeble or not a man. Those who refused to join in were leaving the unpleasant duty of killing to the others, they were stared at by comrades and felt ashamed, knowing that they would be 'cut' and isolated. But their abstention was not absolute. Although they declined to be directly involved in the killing, they at the same time confirmed the morality which legitimised it. This morality made the we of the in-group, which was committed to 'toughness', into an absolute, and suspended sympathy with the defenceless adversary, which was stigmatised as 'soft'. In abstaining Sibille accepted that he was not 'tough'. And the policemen who stood aside in Poland not only had to swallow being labelled 'weaklings' or 'kids'. Talking to comrades who did join in, or to their superiors, they assessed themselves in the same light. In fact they did not claim to be 'too good' to kill, but 'too weak'. They thus went out of their way to stop their conduct appearing to be criticism of their comrades. They did not question the morality of the community, but instead interpreted their own psychological constitution as pathological.⁵⁷ In opting out, these individuals presented themselves as exceptions to the rule of the symbolic order of the male community, which they were tied into and on which they themselves were still dependent. Such was the division of labour in doing daily business, ensuring that who refused to participate did keep a marginal position and at least alleviated their social isolation. In fact they performed an important function in the internal structure of the group. In a culture of dominant 'tough' masculinity they represented the other and thus helped to make it properly visible. In this way the non-participants contributed to the hierarchical internal

⁵⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (Frankfurt, 1987), 51.

⁵⁷ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 185f.

integration of the group and reinforced the very criminal morality from which they were trying to withdraw.

The People's Community as Brotherhood in Crime

Contrary to the legend created after the war, which would have us believe that the Wehrmacht acted decently, it must be assumed that very large numbers of Wehrmacht soldiers knew that the war they were waging was criminal in character, even if only a minority was directly involved in murdering Jews or in other massacres. The majority was well aware of their role as part of a great community of criminality. Even during the advance in the East in 1941 many a soldier couldn't help thinking 'what things would be like if we were ever to be defeated' and 'had to shudder'.⁵⁸ It was to such anxieties that propaganda appealed after 1942, painting a picture for the German population of the vengeance the Jews would take in the event of defeat. 'What would be the lot of the German people', so Göring asked in October 1942, if we were not to win this battle.... *If the war is lost, you face annihilation.* Nobody should delude themselves that afterwards they could disown 'these nasty Nazis'. 'The Jews' would treat everybody the same, for 'their thirst for vengeance is directed at the German people'.⁵⁹ Propaganda yoked the population into a community with a common fate, united by crime, from which there was no escape. The crimes of the Holocaust were treated as a secret, although as an open secret. That they were talked about, was not only something which could not be prevented, there was actually a method in it. Things that could not be talked about were morally dubious.⁶⁰ The message of fearful crimes reached its targets. 'It's true, we must win the war if we don't want to be helpless victims of the Jews and their revenge', a soldier remarked in June 1943.⁶¹ Another soldier stated: 'We Germans are a nation which has gone for this war really actively and will have to bear the consequences'. This insight did not however shake the soldiers' conviction of the legitimacy of the war. On the contrary, fear of the vengeance of the Jews or the 'beasts' from the East only

⁵⁸ Farnbacher's diary, 25.09.41. Cp Ernst Klee et al. (eds.), *"The Good Old Days"* (New York, 1991), 43.

⁵⁹ Speech by Göring, 4.10.1942, quoted in David Bankier, *Die öffentliche Meinung im Hitler-Staat* (Berlin, 1995), 225.

⁶⁰ Peter Longerich, *„Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!“ Die Deutschen und die Judenverfolgung* (Berlin, 2006); Jeffrey Herf, *The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust* (New York 2006).

⁶¹ Otto Buchbender and Reinhold Sterz (eds.), *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges* (Munich, 1982), 117f.

intensified the impression of the fateful nature of the war. ‘We could have done without the war’, the same soldier went on, ‘but who would have wanted to answer to the coming generation for the consequences [...] The truth was that Russia was an enemy country and a shithole.’⁶² A strong sense of the justice of their own cause was deeply rooted in the soldiers’ ideological world. Faced with Italy’s ‘treachery’ in 1943, one of them stated: ‘You can honestly say, when a nation is deceived and faces a world of enemies [and] stands firm in spite of everything, that it is a chosen people. Should we still lose, then I don’t know what you can call a just cause’.⁶³ That was the morality of shame culture. Nothing was more important to it than social cohesion. The good and morally right person was the one who, regardless of personal scruples, uncertainties or anxieties, unswervingly did what the community did and kept ‘faith’ with it. Those who broke ranks were morally reprehensible: ‘We have no time for traitors’. Especially amongst small groups the rule was: ‘if you won’t join in, you’re a rogue’.⁶⁴ Only those who joined in had a right to survive. Those who pulled out were outlaws.

Those who did join in and comply, though, even if only in the ‘outer regions’ of their personality, as Frank Matzke had said in 1930, enjoyed the easy life of comradeship, which both exonerated you of guilt and gave you solace. For the dispensation from the need to show humanity towards your adversary was legitimised not only by the dehumanised image of the enemy but also by the humanity which the group cultivated within its own confines. ‘Humanity’, selflessness, mutual solicitude, security, even affection were not foreign to it. They just remained confined in general to your own group. The longer the war went on, the more the soldiers were confronted not only with participation in the murder of the opposing population but also with the deaths of masses of their own comrades. But the experience of physical destruction did not lead the soldiers in any way to doubt its social productivity. They knew in the final years of the war better than at the outset how to produce social cohesion in the small combat units, over and over again and with constant new personnel. When Corporal Kurt Kreissler, in

⁶² Correspondence between Franz and Hilde Wieschenberg, 1940-45, Kempowski-Archiv Nartum, Best. Nr. 3386, here Franz Wieschenberg, 28.8.1944.

⁶³ Correspondence between Helmut and Edith Wißmann (née Wulf), 1940-45, privately owned, here Helmut Wißmann, 9.8.1943. Compare with Buchbender/Sterz, *Gesicht des Krieges*, 141ff.

⁶⁴ Joachim Dollwet, „Menschen im Krieg, Bejahung - und Widerstand?“, *Jahrbuch für Westdeutsche Landesgeschichte*, 13 (1987), 279-322, here 318.

civilian life a high-ranking leader of the Hitler Youth, returned to his company in January 1945 after convalescent leave, it was clear: 'I shan't meet any more old comrades'. The question 'how few of us are left?' could not be suppressed. But it only made him redouble his efforts to ensure that 'the men and their leaders get to know each other as soon as possible, so that they'll be warmed up ready for the battles to come and for difficult missions'.⁶⁵ If the *memory* of the great crimes committed together remained alive through fear of the revenge of the adversary, the *expectations* of the soldiers were narrowed down to the radius of the action involving their own company. 'We chucked the Russkies out of some German villages. With barely 150 men we put over 1000 Russians to flight [...] Everybody is in a brilliant mood [...] In particular my small unit, the small section of the company which I lead, is of one heart and one soul [...] The spirit in our unit has never been better than at this time. To stick together and to fight side by side and be wounded side by side, that's our wish.' At the end of the war cohesion was no longer, as envisaged in the professional duties of the soldiers, the foundation of their fighting spirit. The battle, the destruction of physical life, formed the pre-condition for social experience.

Conclusion

Why did Hitler's soldiers hold out for so long? And why did they join in at all – in a war which amounted to mass murder and thus went beyond anything which war had previously meant? The answer does not lie only in the soldiers' anti-Semitism or anti-communism, in their belief in Hitler or in the draconian machinery of repression with which military justice and the Gestapo terrorised them. These factors only become significant when related to the social grammar of absorption into the military community and to its moral rules. The 'human' side of comradeship made the 'inhuman' face of war and of their own conduct in it bearable, morally and emotionally. Over and above this compensating function, comradeship operated as the motor for violence, both regular and criminal. It was the basis of the group pressure which the soldiers sensed from their entry into the forces onwards and which to a large extent they had already encountered before,

⁶⁵ Kurt Kreißler, *Memoirs* (a type of diary in manuscript, around 1943/44, copy in the possession of the author of the present article), 149, 153-158.

mainly in the training camps of the Nazi state. But group pressure is only one side of the phenomenon. At the same time comradeship was the symbol of social cohesion, which had a more intense effect the more acutely a social group managed to mark itself off from the outside world, however understood – best of all, by deliberate and definite infringement of the norms of this external world. Comradeship meant: joining in whatever the group deemed to be good, right and appropriate. The apotheosis of this group morality operated as the lubricant of the machinery for annihilation and war. Not only a gallantly fought battle, but also attacks on the subjugated civilian population generated collective feelings of omnipotence. The group celebrated itself and the social sovereignty of the league of men, the awareness that they were above civilian morality (and the international laws of war). It defined the rules of social life anew – or it liked to give itself up to this illusion. That individual members of the group, or many of them, had scruples about the communally committed deeds or abstained from them, did not in principle call the life of the group into question, but instead acted more as the catalyst for a process of assimilation into the community which did not bother with individual lives or responsibilities, and aiming rather at their continual destruction, but otherwise put up with external, though not necessarily internal conformity.

Cultural anthropologists have coined the term shame culture for this group morality and contrasted it to conscience culture. That the paradigm of shame culture in Germany was able to trigger conduct and establish norms to an extent otherwise uncommon in industrialised societies, is not only to be explained by reference to the totalitarian regime of the National Socialists, but has older roots, above all in German coming to terms mentally with the First World War. Society was overstretched in dealing with the consequences of the war, both emotional and moral. On account of the defeat and the humiliation by the Versailles Treaty this burden hit Germany harder than all the other nations involved in the First World War. The socio-cultural fragmentation of Germany as a 'latecomer' amongst the European nation states propelled it in the same direction. From around the turn of the century growing unease was stirring over the division into classes, denominations, regions and not least over gender conflict. In the First World War the split in the nation escalated and caused the longing for a great 'people's community' healed of all inner conflicts to grow all the more. In a certain

sense this longing was fulfilled in the Second World War – in the shape of a great ‘people’s community’, which could indeed put aside inner conflicts, because it felt bound together by means of a great and communally committed crime.